

Nat Acad Sci

February 14, 1958

Dr. Warren Weaver
Rockefeller Foundation
49 West 49th Street
New York 20, New York

Dear Dr. Weaver:

Last week's Science Club led to the forthcoming "Parliament of Science" and mentioned that you were chairman of this steering committee.

I am delighted to hear of such encouragement to scientific statesmanship, which is going to be so badly needed during the years ahead. It is astonishing how little attention the university faculties as such have been paying to the developments in policy which are going to influence their professional lives from now on. I had, for example, proposed that the faculty here debate the issues of federal aid ~~ten~~ years ago and only just now is the subject going to be on the agenda for a special meeting. I am sure your conference next month will furnish many constructive ideas for groups like our faculty to chew over.

I feel however that one of the issues that may pervade your conference might well be how to consolidate the channels of communication which already exist between the scientific community and the government. I am by no means criticising the proposed conference as adding still another potential channel but I do think that the problem will become more and more unmanageable unless some care is taken. We already have the National Academy-Research Council, the National Science Board, the advisory committees and panels for the NSF, the NIH and any number of other federal agencies; we have the individual scientific societies and such super societies AIBS and AAAS. Because of the fact that still another organization is to be set up for the consideration of science and policy speak for some lack in the already existing agencies?

There are, I concede, good reasons why a self-perpetuating body like the academy should not play such a dominant roll in these times as it did perhaps when it was first charged with the primary responsibility of scientific advice to the federal government. As you know, I was honored to be elected to the academy last year, but in some respects this is an empty honor if the main preoccupation of academy membership is to be the election of new members. If the academy has outlived its usefulness, do you see much point in perpetuating it? Alternatively, if there is still some function for its existence, should it not have an important role in the formulation of scientific policy?

One difficulty as I see it is that none of the present scientific societies are organized primarily for the development of policy. The officialdom of these groups is elected on a number of different bases but almost never on that of the

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man's approach to fundamental policy questions. In these circumstances, it is perhaps only natural and possibly not undesirable that a variety of different organizations should purport to speak for the scientists, but the fact is that no one of them is effectively representative. In the circumstances, it is the more credit to our scientific statesmen that they have been able to function as effectively as they have in the interests of the nation and the scientific community at the same time. However, I do not believe that we will have the necessary debate at the grass root level unless we have some national organization which will be responsive to the policy opinion of its membership in a more direct procedural fashion. The faculties of the respective universities are a potential form that are perhaps beginning to be used more effectively. In addition, I see signs that the AAAS itself is evolving in this direction. It is difficult to see however how one can effectively combine the housekeeping duties of an organization charged with professional functions, arrangements of national meetings and symposia for purely scientific purposes, and the essentially political functions that we are discussing now.

There must be many arguments pro and con over the very desirability of a strictly representative system for the organization of scientific opinion. I would in no case support a thoroughly monolithic set-up even if it were purportedly thoroughly democratic. But I do believe that some consolidation of the channels between scientists and the government is going to be badly needed and that at least one of these channels should be representational in character.

Even more immediately, we should have some coordinating body with effective communications to all existing scientific organizations, if only to facilitate the mechanics of that communication. At the present time, it is very difficult to know what the best channels would be for communicating a policy suggestion arising from an individual or a local organization such as a university faculty. The memorandum which I am enclosing is a case in point as I think you will see from its last paragraph. I am enclosing it as well because you might be amused by it quite independently of the policy question.

With all best regards,

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Medical Genetics

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encl.